AIM

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SAVE STATE STREET

Photo by Peter Rose

WHAT IS HAPPENING TO STATE STREET?

State Street is about to be destroyed. In its place will be a six-lane highway, separated by a half-mile long six-story parking garage for over 4,000 cars.

One whole side of State Street, from George Street to Trumbull Street, will be knocked down. The rest of it will be almost completely rebuilt to look like a suburban shopping center.

WHO DECIDED TO DO THIS?

According to a former high-ranking city official, this is what happened:

"In 1963, John McGuerty, a designer working for the City Plan Department, developed the idea of building a six-lane highway down State Street. Then, in early 1964, the plan was committed by an administrative action and without knowledge of the public or of the City Plan Commission that there was even an issue. Construction was about to begin on the Community Services Building, and it could not begin until the city decided where streets would be located in the immediate area. The Development Administrator (Melvin Adams), doubtless with the knowledge of the Mayor, informed the developers that a new highway would be constructed behind the building, next to the railroad, and he committed the city to building it."

In other words, the decision to destroy State Street was made by a few people, without public participation or knowledge. The public hearings held since then have been a farce, because the plans for State Street were already made and the city was committed to them.

The destruction of State Street is also an important part of the scheme to build a "ring road" through the heart of the city, a road that nobody in the city needs or wants. It is also part of the plan to level huge

areas of downtown to build a new "civic center" covering the blocks between Church, Orange, Chapel and Elm Streets.

WHAT WILL THIS DO TO OUR NEIGHBORHOOD?

Wooster Square will be cut off from the city by a highway and a huge parking garage. Most of the stores we have now will be gone. Instead, there will be fancy, expensive shops for suburbanites. To get to downtown or the stores, we will have to cross a bridge over the highway! Imagine what this will be like for people with shopping carts or mothers with baby strollers.

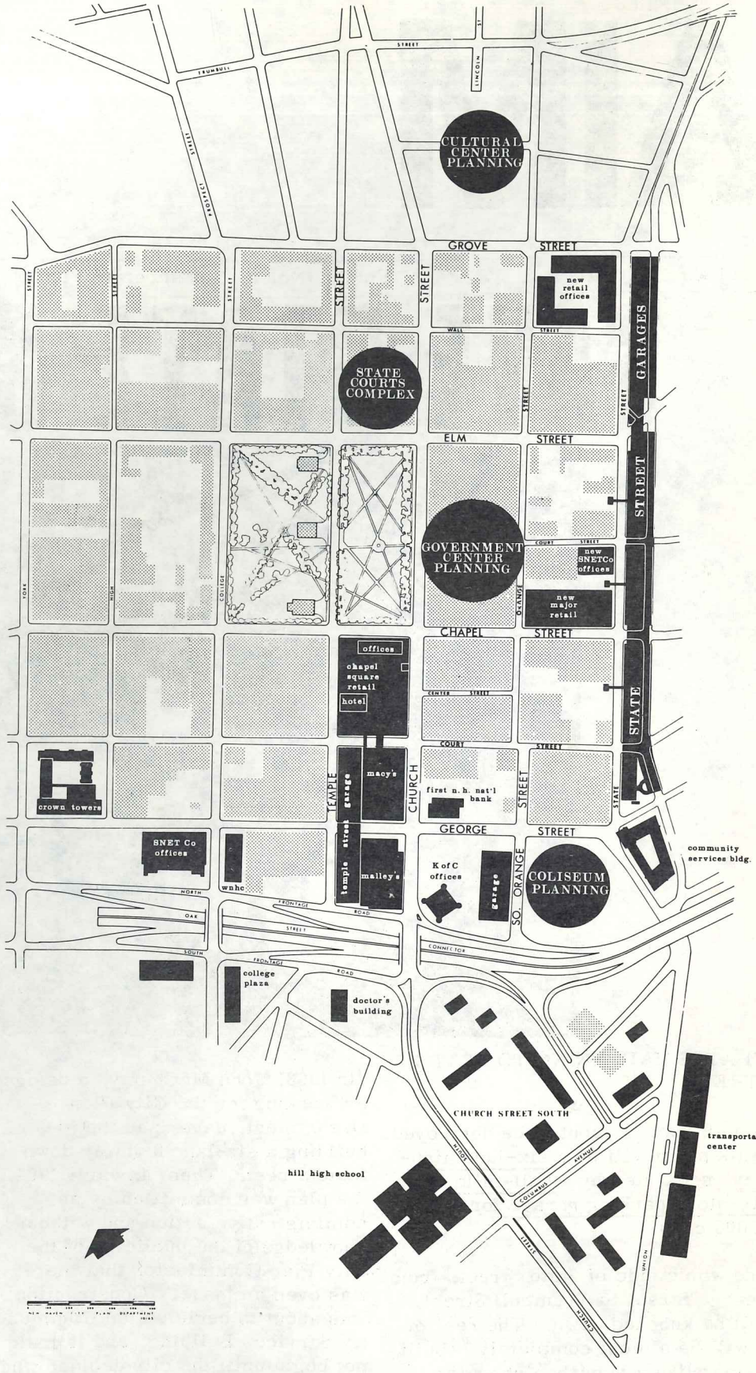
State Street will be a desolate place at night. Without people or activity, it will hardly be a safe place to walk. Wooster Square will become an island between the new highway and I-91 on the other side, while the cars attracted by the road and parking will add to already severe air pollution. Many neighborhood people will themselves be forced to use cars to get to stores they used to walk to.

WHAT COULD BE DONE?

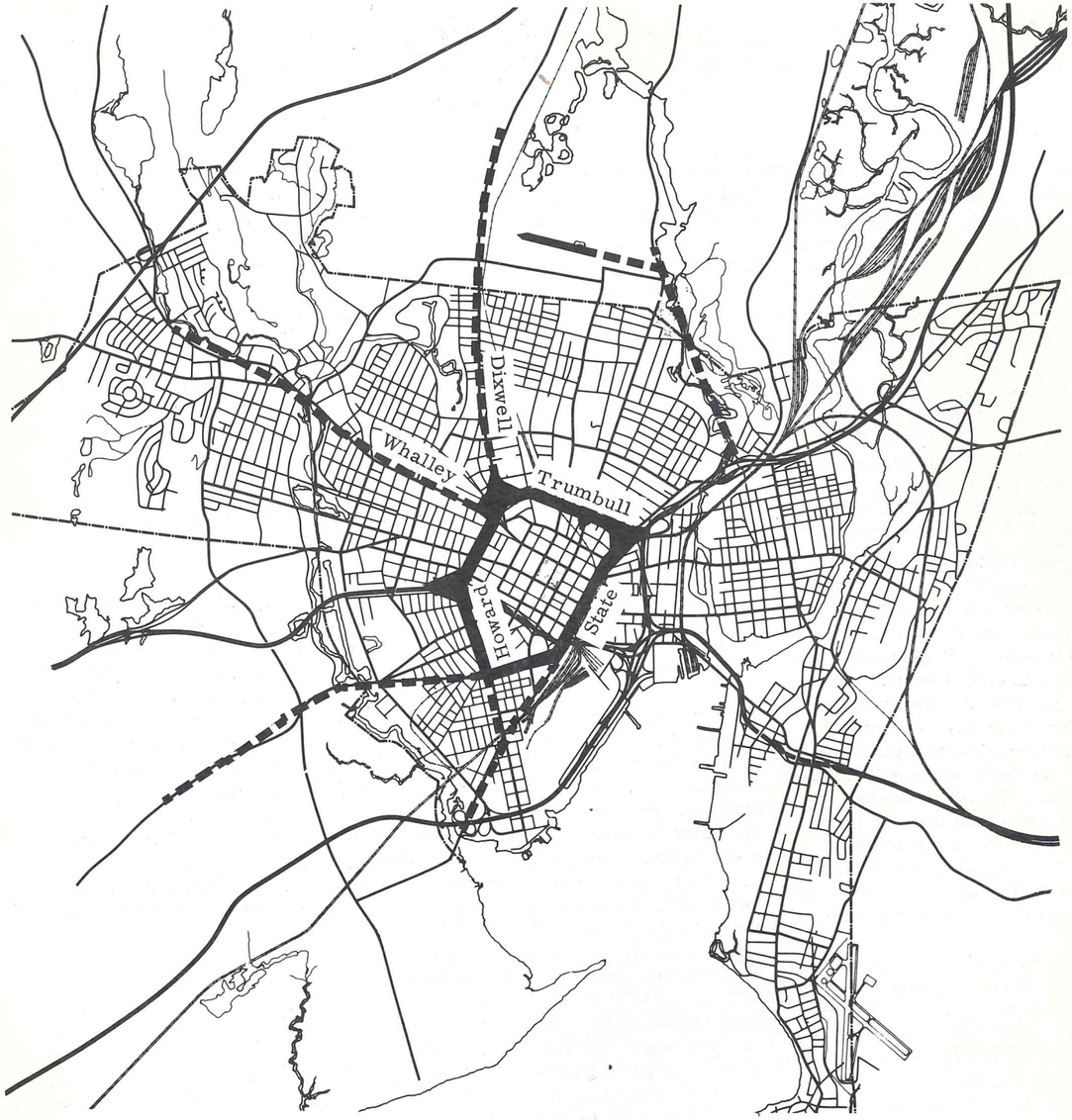
Roadbuilders always say that highways must be built because of increasing traffic, but in fact new roads always attract more cars, calling for more roads, then more cars, and so on.

We suggest that State Street could be rehabilitated and planned by the people of the neighborhood and the street. It could be maintained as a neighborhood shopping district and a low-rent retail area for stores that are rapidly being squeezed out of New Haven.

Thru traffic could be discouraged from using State Street and routed onto I-91, or the Oak Street Connector. Possibly small apartments for single people or young couples could be built above the stores. But most of all, it could be a living, thriving place for the people of the city rather than the cars of visitors.



Plan for downtown New Haven. Note parking garage on State Street, from George to Grove Streets. The garage will be built between a six-lane highway and overhang three lanes. Note stairways leading from garage to cross highway.



From the Trumbull Street Exit of Route 91, the proposed Loop Road will tunnel under the Yale University Campus at an estimated cost of $15,000,000.00 and will surface behind the Payne Whitney Gymnasium, effectively separating the Dixwell Neighborhood from downtown and the Yale campus. After negotiating the already dangerous intersection of Whalley, Goffe, Dixwell and Broadway, the road will either proceed down the existing Dwight and Howe Streets (neither a pleasant nor a safe situation for the people living on these streets) or Howe Street will be widened to accomodate six lanes of high speed traffic (creating problems at the intersections of Elm, Edgewood, Chapel and George Streets). This will separate the Dwight Neighborhood from downtown. Either one or the other of these alternatives will join Howard Ave. over the proposed extension of the Oak Street Connector. The Loop Road will continue down a widened Howard Ave. to a widened Columbus Ave. and proceed to Union Street (in front of the Railroad Station). This link will separate the Hill Neighborhood from downtown and the Yale University Medical Center. The Loop Road will then proceed on its final lap as a six-lane highway (with a six block, one half mile long parking garage) where State Street is presently located, this time separating the Wooster Square Neighborhood from downtown.

CITIZENS' PETITION BRINGS ACTION

As demolition of the State Street area proceeded and no announcement of detailed future plans was issued by the New Haven Redevelopment Agency, many people in the Wooster Square area became increasingly unhappy at the prospect of the loss of these essential services and the obliteration of the last vestige of an Old World environment in New Haven. Attempts by concerned residents to bring up the issue at meetings of the Wooster Square Association were frustrated by the Redevelopment Agency representatives. They declared on one occasion that the Agency considered the State Street project outside the Wooster Square project area, and it therefore could not be discussed. Presumably the fact that hundreds of people in Wooster Square are totally dependent on that area for shopping was not a consideration that could be indicated on their maps with demarcation lines. On other occasions, residents were told that the plans were still too uncertain to be discussed; on another we were promised a full discussion as soon as a new project director was chosen.

Then quite by chance, a life-long resident of Wooster Square, neither a member of the Wooster Square Association nor AIM, had the idea of starting a petition to ask for at least a guarantee that the grocery needs of the area be considered. He was joined by several concerned neighbors, some of whom are members of AIM. Together they worked out the wording of a petition:

"We, the undersigned residents of the 10th, 11th, and 12th wards, wish first of all to express our great unhappiness over the Redevelopment plans which are driving away many food merchants on State Street who have served us well for many years.

"Secondly, in view of the loss of the these stores and the coming move of the Cooperative Market on Chapel Street, we ask the Mayor for clear and definite guarantees that we will not be deprived of conveniently located grocery, meat, and fruit markets during the inevitable long delay between the departure of our present markets and the completion of whatever the city plans for our area.

"A prime reason for living in this area has been its nearness to stores of high quality and genuine individuality. We do not see why we should now be forced to shop by car, nor do we see in particular why the elderly, those with children, and those who do not have cars should have their daily lives so drastically altered by the plans of the Redevelopment Agency."

The resultant Committee to Save Our Stores issued a press release quoting the petition and outlining what little we had been able to discover about the city's plans for State Street. (The Redevelopment Agency was unable to provide us with any statement of plans, except old newspaper clippings). We pointed out in the press release, for example, that the manager of the Mohawk Market, on the corner of State and Court Streets, had told us that a newspaper report two years ago about the Southern New England Telephone Co. building (replacing Mohawk) was the very first word he had had about the future of his business. Other merchants had been treated in a similarily high-handed way. In general all shopkeepers knew they had to go, but no one knew when: in 6 months, 3 years, or 5. Business losses were estimated to be very high for this reason. No one felt he could invest much in improvements and expanded services. In fact, the behavior of the Agency seems designed to create the depressed conditions which it uses to justify massive obliteration of an area.

The reaction to the petition was heartening. Within three weeks over 500 names were collected. All those visited with the petition were truly concerned about their neighborhood, and quite happy to find people who were enlisting them in an effort to control what is done to their neighborhood. Yet it was discouraging to meet so many people who felt little could be done to stop the Redevelopment Agency's plans, even when they adversely affected the people who lived in the area being planned, or in this case literally being destroyed by the Agency.

We also found discontents which went far beyond the scope of our original petition. One older man complained: "I can buy food, but I got to find a place to cook it. They tear down all the rooms and hotels." At a table set up near the stores we also met many many people who came from other parts of New Haven and even from Hamden because of the unique character of these stores, the excellent bargains, the unusual produce, the friendly personal service, the Old World atmosphere.

Unfortunately the petition came too late for some shopkeepers. The locksmith has gone from his small key-filled shop in what was a delightful old cobblestone alley. An open air fresh produce market has relocated in the Dixwell area. Others have plans to go. They could not build a business on months of indecision. However, as a result of the petition, it now appears that the two largest food stores will remain. After one week of circulating the petition, an agreement was signed between Salvatore Ferrara, Manager of the Mohawk Market, and Melvin J. Adams, Development Administrator, that the Mohawk would not be forced to close its doors until the Agency could provide them with another building in the area. The Co-op Market pressed for a similar agreement with the city. It had already planned to move everything to a new store on Dixwell Avenue at the first of the year. Now they are hoping to maintain both establishments.

How these and hopefully other markets will actually be able to relocate in the new State Street complex remains to be seen. The Redevelopment Agency has big plans for the area. It is not at all clear how a six-lane highway and six-story, half-mile long parking garage can suit the needs of the people of Wooster Square. The city resident is being left with fewer and fewer shopping alternatives. Areas that were once zoned for multiple uses are now solely residential. As the few remaining corner stores in Wooster Square go out of business, the heart of the city becomes a bit quieter, a lot less interesting, and plainly no longer a city.

There will be a very important meeting of the Wooster Square Community Association on Thursday, November 30, at 8:00 p.m. in the Conte School Cafeteria. All residents will be urged to attend. The speakers at that meeting will disclose what the plans actually are. At that time the residents of the area can accept or not accept what is being planned for them.

- Karin Cook
- Peter Rose

Photo by Dave Dickson

An open-air fruit market on the corner of State and Chapel. It recently closed down.

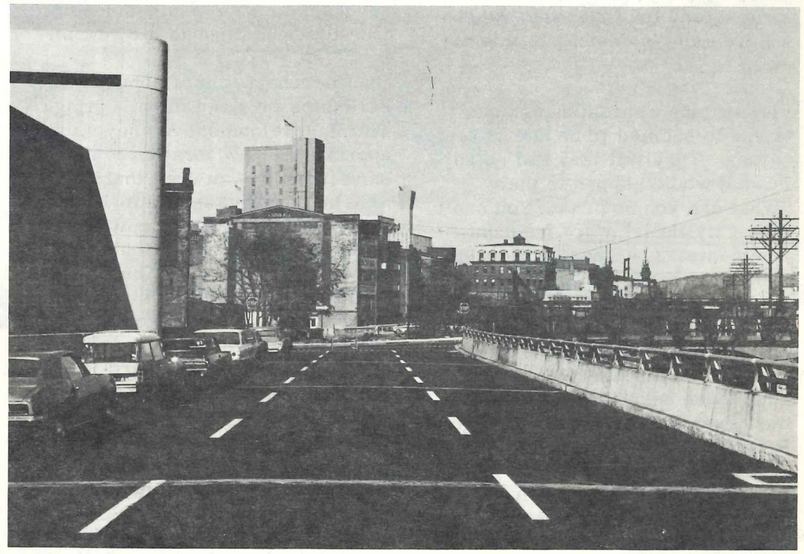


Photo by Dave Dickson

Notice how this road, running between the new Community Services Building and the railroad tracks, points directly into the buildings on State Street.

TALKING WITH STATE STREET BUSINESSMEN

"Sure we've been pushed around. We had no choice. If you get a new location, the rent is twice as high and you've lost your clientele. You don't bring old customers with you when you move like everybody thinks. And meanwhile you've got maybe four or five mouths to feed." These are the words of one merchant on State Street forced to close his business because redevelopment has taken over the property for its proposed renewal plans.

A reporter from the AIM Newsletter talked with several State Street businessmen to find out how urban renewal affects their businesses and their lives. Understandably, many merchants seemed reluctant to talk freely about their feelings toward State Street renewal. After all, the Redevelopment Agency now owns most of the buildings in which their various businesses are located (and for that same reason we are using no names in this article).

The attitude of most merchants talked to seemed to be one of resignation. They felt they had no say in what would happen to them. "What can you do?" or "You can't fight City Hall." were frequent comments. One man, however, seemed to think that losing their businesses was as much the fault of the merchants as the city. He told me that there was a State Street Businessmen's Association that could have been influential if the businessmen in it had stuck together. But each man was out only for himself and once he got a good price from the Redevelopment Agency, he wouldn't stay and fight with the others. Another businessman said the Association had had only one meeting that he knew about, while yet another businessman had never even heard of the organization.

It was suggested that if the businessmen's association had fought together other alternatives to tearing down their stores might have been possible. Specifically, funds might have been provided for extensive remodeling, rehabilitation and parking facilities. This might have been one good alternative to the city's plan which has very little room for small businesses.

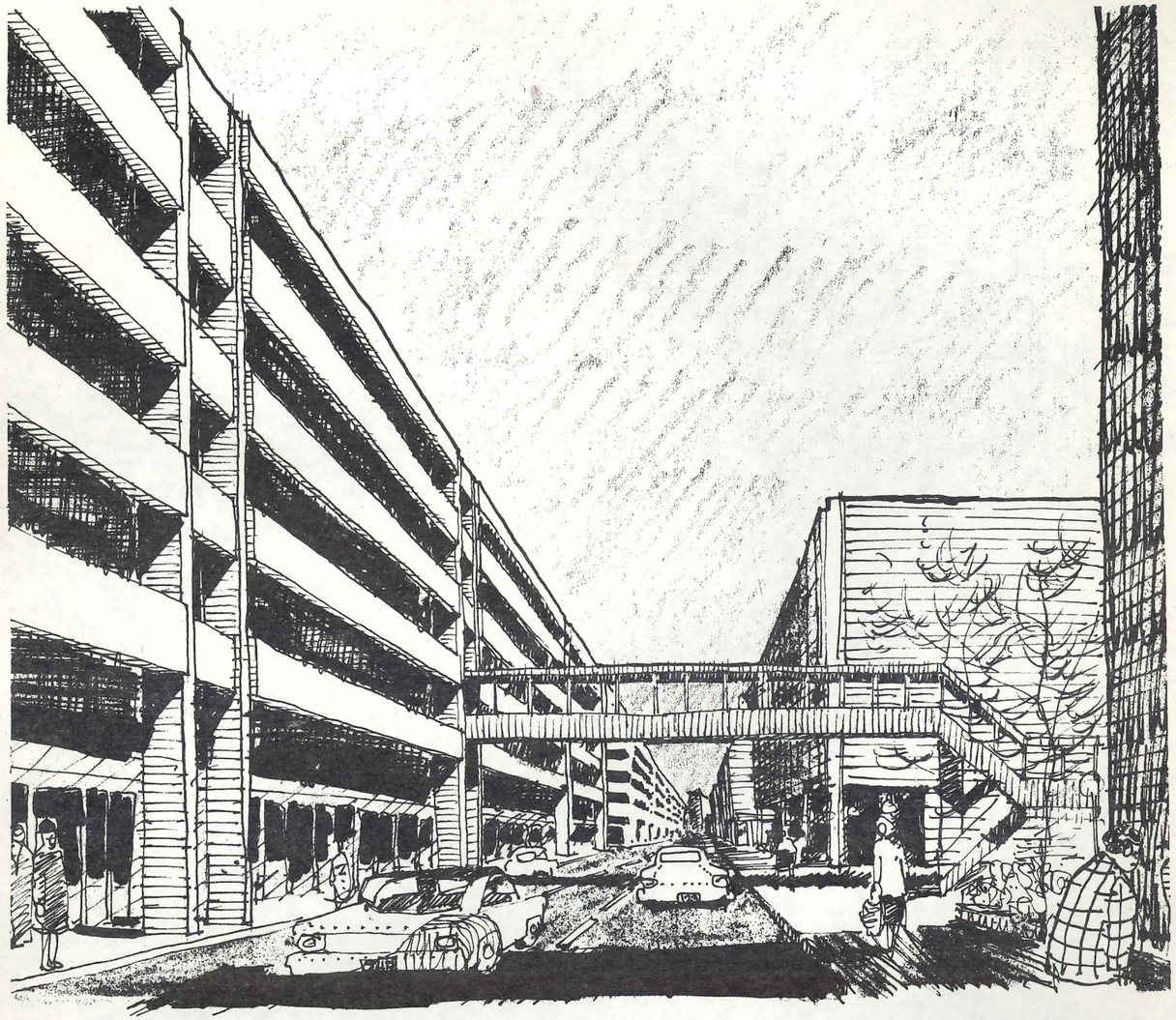
Most merchants interviewed feel there is a great need in New Haven for low-rent buildings in a commercial area for small businessmen. As one man said, "The big ones (businesses) are staying, the small ones are getting buried unless they can come up with some big money." This raises the important question of where small businesses can ever go as one area of the city after another comes under the sweeping-out processes of urban renewal such as are now going on in the State Street area. Already many of these businesses have been forced to relocate several times (in some cases up to four times in eight to ten years).

One merchant told of some of the hardships involved in relocating. The Redevelopment Agency must approve the new location to make sure it isn't in an area that will also be renewed and so force the relocating business to move again. In the case of this particular merchant, however, a new building was found and approved by the Agency, a great deal of the merchant's money was spent in remodeling and rewiring, and the hard job of moving much heavy equipment was accomplished (paid for by the city). The merchant thought of this as a permanent move since the building had been approved as not being in the path of more renewal. Yet, in only 14 months the same business was again forced to move because of renewal -- long before it could make up in profits the great expenses of remodeling and rewiring. When a complaint was made to the Redevelopment Agency by this merchant, saying "But you approved this building." the Agency's answer was, "What do you care? The city pays the moving costs." This merchant's experience points up another significant aspect of renewal procedures: the great lack of concern on the part of the Agency for the loss of business, expenses involved, and great inconvenience for the businessman in moving. As one businessman said, "If you're getting on in years, you can't just keep starting over. It's hard work and expensive and you lose all your old customers. It takes years to build up a whole new trade, and some of us are just too old, so we're forced to close out."

Several businessmen were asked if the Redevelopment Agency had tried to find new locations for their businesses. The feeling was that the Agency did really try, but that there was just no place to go that would pay. When asked if they had ever been consulted about the plans for State Street renewal in the first place, the merchant's all said they hadn't been. "The people didn't have any say at all so far as I know." said one man. Yet, it seems that the businessmen and residents of an area have a basic right to be consulted about what the city will do to their businesses and neighborhood. After all, the city belongs to the people who live in it and not to City Hall.

There have been some public hearings held about renewal. One merchant told us about one such hearing. The rules of the hearings are that all the testimony for the city's side is heard first and cannot be interrupted for questions, comments, or disagreements. A battery of public officials (often including the Chief's of the Police and Fire Departments) are usually called to testify for the city. That lasts for so long that by the time it comes to the citizens chance to speak, they're either exhausted or feel inadequate to confront all those officials. Also, it was suggested by some people

See Businessmen Page 8



Artists renderings of what State Street will look like when completed. There are three more lanes of traffic under the parking garage to the left. This garage will be two stories higher and four blocks longer than the garge on Temple Street between Crown and Frontage Road, to give you an idea of its huge size. Note the pedestrian bridges that will require climbing many stairs.

businessmen cont.

interviewed, that merchants may often feel reluctant to speak out because then they might not get as good a settlement deal for their businesses from the Redevelopment Agency. This is a far cry from the public discussion that should accompany such major changes to our city and the lives of the people who live in it.

One other thing that struck me as I talked with State Street businessmen was their strong feeling that business had gotten worse on State Street over the past few years. They all seemed to feel this was because so many buildings (both commercial and residential) had been torn down in the immediately surrounding neighborhood that there were fewer and fewer people around. Yet, whenever buildings have been torn down or now stand empty in the State Street area, it is usually a direct result of urban renewal. So what appears to have happened is that renewal in one part of a neighborhood forces people to leave, causing business to fall off in another part of the neighborhood and deteriorate to a point where it too must be "renewed" (which now seems to mean "removed").

These businessmen interviewed are all very sorry they must leave, even though many think it is inevitable. Most have been on State Street for many years. They have all been living in great insecurity for two to four years, not knowing when they will have to close, where they will go, or how they will support their families if they can't relocate profitably. These businessmen have been excluded from any of the decisions made about their business places and they still don't know what will happen to them. And as one merchant said, it's hard to speak out, all you get is cheap newspaper publicity -- they make it sound like you're the criminal.

There is a very important thing we should learn from the experiences of the State Street merchants. And that is that the Redevelopment Agency will bypass public discussion and participation in decisions about renewal if we let them -- just as they have decided what the businessmen on State Street must do. So far, citizens have had little to say about the destruction of the stores now within walking distance from their homes -- stores that, by and large, will not be replaced in the city's plan for State Street. We should learn from these merchants how important it is to stand together to make our opinions heard and felt by City Hall.

- Linda Prokopy

AIM

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